

## [Adam Laboda--Pittsfield #1]

ORIGINAL MSS. OR FIELD NOTES (Check one)

PUB. Living Lore in

New England

TITLE Adam Laboda - Pittsfield #1

WRITER Clair Perry

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COMMENTS

Polish Textile Worker 12/22/38 1938-9

STATE MASSACHUSETTS

NAME OF WORKER CLAIR PERRY

ADDRESS PITTSFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS

SUBJECT LIVING LORE

NAME AND ADDRESS OF INFORMANT ADAM LABODA, PITTSFIELD,  
MASSACHUSETTS

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Adam [?] Laboda is a square faced genial man about fifty-five years old. Of Polish descent he has been naturalized for many years. He is an expert spinner employed by the Berkshire Woolen and Worsted Company. About fifteen years ago, he purchased a five tenement wooden block on the [Onota?] Street hill where he lives. His grown son and a daughter in her late "teens live with their parents. Mrs. Laboda is a dark eyed, quiet women evidently very proud of her family and particularly of her son although she is reluctant to be drawn into the conversation.

Both Mr. Laboda's children attended high school. The son who accompanied his father to Poland last summer works in the same factory as his father. The Labodas are known as a thrifty, hard working family, well liked by friends and neighbors. Mr. Laboda was dressed carefully in good street clothes when called upon following his work which ends at 3:15 p.m.

"I was born in the village of Zowisezbie, near Tarnow. I was the oldest son of nine boys and two girls and we had a farm of what is about 20 acres, America; our acres equal  $2 \frac{3}{4}$  of those here. My family of eleven persons lived in a two room house, such as a log cabin that you have, with a straw thatched roof and a great brick stove for heat and an iron range for cooking. It was whitewashed up to the eaves, the logs chinked with clay to keep out cold and wind. Our older people lived in one room cabins but the law would not allow any less than two rooms to be built at that time. The roof is now shingled with [clay,?] made like bricks or tile. I was in Poland last summer and took more than 200 pictures. I will show you some.

Mr. Laboda brought out a fine collection of snapshots, including one of the neat white cottage where he was born with its thatched roof and another showing it with the tile roof, still another was of the home of a brother who still lives nearby in a larger frame house with wood shingled roof and trim chimneys.

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"We worked the farm together and raised everything from wheat to vegetables and had cattle and pigs and geese and ducks and chickens. You can see the fence, " pointing to one of the snapshots, "that we made by sticking posts in the ground and weaving slender willow saplings in and out to keep the poultry and pigs in their yards. Those white things are sheets drying on bushes and fences.

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"We made our own butter and cheeses threshed our own grain, slaughtered our own pigs. Here is a picture of a reaping machine in the field.

The photo showed a type of reaper used in America forty years ago. The grain had to be bound by hand into sheaves after being cut and withes of the straw were used to bind them. Mr. Lobada and the interviewer exchanged memories of farm work, such as the agonizing labor of 'shocking up' barley, with its sharp beards that cut the wrists to rawness and bleeding and dug into the skin wherever the clothing was tight, so that one must work with his shirt outside his trousers and preferably sockless.

"I went to school for eight years, two of them the same as junior high school in America. I studied German two years and could speak it but not much now. There are many Germans in Poland toady.

"Our life on the farm was not easy but it was not too harsh. We lived comfortably by all working together, our family. But I had an uncle in Syracuse who wrote us about America and so a party of 14 boys from around our village was made up, with a man for a leader, to go to America. We took train and traveled two days to Bremen, there we took ship and voyaged for 12 days. The boys were all from 14 to 16 years of age. This was in the great emigration period from 1890 to 1902 about. I remember we landed 3 in New York harbor on April 2, and then went up the river to Albany on another boat and took train to Gilbertsville, Massachusetts, where there are big woolen mills. I had a friend there and I

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got a job in the spinning room. I had worked in a mill in Germany about two weeks, one time, but had gone back to the farm before I came to America.

“The thing that seemed strangest to us boys when we came to America were the black people, you know, the Negroes. We saw many of them in New York and some on the river boat to Albany and we could not understand why there would be black people here.

“In Gilbertsville all we boys went to work and rented rooms from Polish people who lived in company houses. Four boys to a room at \$3 each a month and we bought our own food and cooked it. We earned to start with \$2.77 a week and worked 64 hours a week, then we got up to \$4.76 a week and for a year it was \$4.64. It cost only four cents a loaf for bread and four cents a pound for meat but we had no chance to go to shows or anything; we could just squeeze by as they say now. After nine years I was earning \$8.12 a week and I had got ahead faster than some of the older men who got only \$5.08 a week. Our best fun was dancing in the houses and then the company built a dance hall for us so that it cost nothing to dance. There were girls living there, 4 working in the mills, too, Polish girls who were nice.

“In 1908 I went back to Poland to see my people. My father was very sick and he wanted me to marry and have the wedding before he died. Well, that did not look so good. I did not want to marry a girl in Poland for I wanted to go back to America and I was afraid I would be kept there but I knew a girl from Gilbertsville who had gone home to a place near our village before me and so I said to my father, ‘All right I will get married then.’ I went to see her, this girl, and she said ‘Yes’ because she knew me quite well and so on October 8, 1908, we were married and on November 12, we were back in America and glad of it. I had a good job and a good wife. I was 23 years old. I came to Pittsfield then and got work in the Berkshire Woolen and have been with them since, always as a spinner.

“I went back to Poland this last summer, leaving here June 22 and returning August 20. I visited four of my brothers and a sister. You see, it is the thing in Poland for a farmer's

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family to leave the youngest son at home to care for the old folks and when they die he gets the farm for his own. It is a sort of tradition, and my youngest brother now owns the farm. He has kept it up as well as you can see from the pictures. But I should not want to live there; I am more glad that I came to America. It is a great country.

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"The greatest moment of my life was in Poland when I went to the first mass said by my godson, a nephew, in his church in Poland. I was the guest of honor, you see; everything was done for me to welcome me. I was not called a Polack, I was always called an American and it made me very proud. They had big banquet at the parish house and another, later, at the priest's home and little girls in costume sang songs and made speeches of welcome to me and then I visited the graves of my father and mother. I also went to see a man whom I had known in school who was now a member of Parliament. He had returned to school as a grown man to study German. His name is Jacob Bojho, and he is now 90 years old. He is called a Marshal or Senator. He wears many decorations and he sat in the first Parliament after Poland was restored. The country has been twice torn apart, once by the Russians and once by Germany. I found that the lower class people, the poor ones think that Hitler is all right. I talked with many German people in Poland about it and I had a two hours talk with a professor at Cracow University who told me that a man like Franklin D. Roosevelt is born only about every 50 years and that what Europe needs is a Roosevelt to join the nations peaceably and help them to get over their troubles. The poor German people have been given work so that they can eat and they like Hitler for that. They say he is a great man but the higher classes, the 6 richer ones, the government classes (in Poland) do not like him. They are afraid of him and of the independence of Poland of which they are very jealous. The Poles are proud of their country. They are fighters, too, and will fight to preserve their autonomy.

"I traveled around Poland on an excursion train for 15 days. It cost but \$19 for the whole trip and I visited Cracow and Warsaw and other large cities and talked with

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many persons. I found them all believing that Roosevelt is the sort of man that they should have if they could find one. They do not want a dictator there in Poland.

"We will come out of this depression here in Americas yes, indeed; things look very much better now. Our plant is running well and often night and day. It was not wiped out like those other textile mills here that went under, because the Berkshire Woolen turned quickly to making cheaper cloth which is in demand and many patterns. Then, too, Mr. Noonan (the present manager and chief owner) was a labor man, himself, from north Ireland and he knew how to treat his people. So did Mr. Savery who is dead. He was a fine man. I knew him well.

"I do not belong to any union. I did not belong to the United Textile Workers which was here years ago. It has gone out of business here. The C.I.O. is trying to organize but I do not know how much they are getting ahead, not much. The company treats its workers well. No, they did not have any old age pension before the law. I like the Social Security law very well, indeed. But in Poland we have a different one that is for unemployment, there everyone gets paid when he cannot work, and they have government inspectors who inquire why one does not work and if he doesn't want to work he does not get anything, but if he cannot find it or is unable, he is paid. His case is studied by a committee of three, one from the Government, one from the workers and a neutral one.

"In that way everyone gets paid not for just a few weeks as here but so long as he cannot find work or is unable to work. It is a good law.

"I will tell you about what happened to those 14 Polish boys who came to America together. Four of them committed suicide, one shot himself, one hung himself, one took poison, one drowned himself. There is one who is a big contractor in Buffalo, another who has a large store in Boston. The four who killed themselves had left the church and took to drinking and that finished them. The rest are working something like me."